SNF Project's most senior operator retires after 39 years

Michele Gerber, *Fluor Hanford*

As Charles "Scotty" Scott was preparing to leave Hanford this week, after working here since 1963, he sat down with the *Reach* and shared his thoughts and feelings about work at this huge, complex site. Scott, now the most senior operator at the K Basins, came to Hanford after a four-year stint with an Air Force missile squadron in Japan. A lifelong Tri-Citian whose father worked in the Hanford Patrol from World War II through the mid-1960s, Scott saw Hanford as a natural place to work.

"The site had a family feeling in those days," he said. "There was one goal for everyone — production. We all felt like we were working together for the same thing." Most of the training, he remembers, was done hands-on, on the job, with senior operators teaching new crew members as the work happened. "The senior operators had tremendous experience, and they knew how to work efficiently. There were many ways I learned to start one operation while finishing another, in order to maximize productivity."

1960s Hanford busy, focused

The Hanford that Scott entered in January 1963 was at the center of urgent world events. The Cuban missile crisis, which nearly sent the United States and the Soviet Union into nuclear war, had occurred just two months earlier. As America's foremost nuclear defense arsenal, Hanford hit the peak of its plutonium production in 1963. Scott reported for work at the 200 East Area steam and power division, performing support work for all 200 East facilities, but primarily for the PUREX (Plutonium-uranium Extraction) Facility.

Charles "Scotty" Scott takes a water reading at the KW Basin, where he has been assigned for the past five years.

The mighty PUREX, which began production in January 1956, had already surpassed the production totals for all other Hanford chemical separations facilities combined. As a result, it performed almost all of the dissolution and reprocessing of irradiated uranium from Hanford's reactors. The REDOX (Reduction-Oxidation) Plant in the 200 West Area was still running, but it processed only smaller, specialized loads of uranium.

"Everybody in the 200 East Area was focused on PUREX," Scott recalled. "Of course we also supported operations in the old evaporator [242-B], and in the late 1960s we supported the Strontium Semiworks [also known as C Plant] where they were beginning tests for the B Plant isotope partitioning mission. But mostly everyone worked to make sure PUREX had everything it needed. We were busy every day, and we were 'crew-oriented.' PUREX had a high priority and you could get the supplies you needed almost as soon as you asked for them."

1970s brought changes

The Hanford world was changing. President Lyndon Johnson announced a decision in early 1964 to begin closing Hanford's reactors. Eight of the nine reactors closed between December 1964 and early 1971. N Reactor continued production, but PUREX quickly processed out its inventory. PUREX itself was shut down in 1972 for upgrades and maintenance. Scott recalled that crews stayed busy during the PUREX outage be-

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cause tanks, pumps, the facility's 33 miles of piping and many other areas of the massive plant were monitored daily. PUREX was viewed as a premier asset by the U.S. government, and resources were dedicated to making sure that plant systems did not deteriorate during the outage.

Nevertheless, the planned 18-month outage stretched on and on, eventually lasting 11 years. "We never could catch up with the environmental regulations during those years," Scott said.

The National Environmental Policy Act and many follow-on statutes, regulations and orders were passed in rapid succession during the 1970s. "As soon as we would finish a modification to contain more piping in the PUREX facility, build in the oxide conversion cell [N Cell], upgrade the silver reactor filters and other work, we would think we were ready to re-start," Scott explained. "Then new regulations would come along, and nothing that existed at PUREX would be 'grandfathered.' In other words, we had to re-work the plant as if it were a new facility being built to the new standards. This was a frustrating time for Hanford people."

Reagan's defense build-up

"Everything changed in the early 1980s," Scott said. President Reagan's bold standoff with the Soviet Union brought large new defense missions to Hanford, and PUREX re-started in November 1983. Scott worked in the PUREX sample gallery, maintaining sampling equipment and setting up for many jobs. Life was hectic, as an average of four well cars per day of irradiated uranium arrived from N Reactor.

On Dec. 7, 1988, one of the main gauges in the PUREX control room showed a low reading for back-up steam power. The plant was shut down that very day in order to check systems. Again the shutdown languished, but the plant conducted a stabilization run from late 1989 through early 1990 to process plutonium-bearing liquids that had been in internal systems on the day of the sudden closure. In October 1990, DOE issued a shutdown order for PUREX, and an all-employee meeting was held. Scott recalled that workers felt resigned to the decision. "We expected the news by then," he said. "However, we still felt let down, and also concerned for jobs."

The closure order

PUREX's final closure order came in December 1992, and a deactivation project followed. Scott stayed with the old plant, working to pump systems and excess thousands of tons of materials, until May 1997, just two months before the final deactivation ceremony. He then transferred to the Spent Nuclear Fuel Project to work at the K Basins. He supported basin systems while massive new fuel processing systems were installed.

Comparing earlier Hanford work with today, Scott believes things are harder today because "all work is extremely procedure-driven and there is no room for ingenuity and know-how."

Asked to provide some lessons or advice for Hanford employees today, Scott said, "Change is a constant at Hanford. Contracts, contractors, government systems and projects change frequently and this causes rumors and fear. Don't fight change! When change comes, gather whatever real facts you can and stick together with your fellow workers. Don't let fear tear up lives and relationships."

Scott, who married in 1966, has two children and five grandchildren. He plans to remain in the Tri-Cities and pursue family camping, fishing, hobbies and volunteer work. ■